



STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305

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STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Department of Genetics

(415) 497-5052

Mr. James J. Mayer
Walter H. Mayer & Co.
4580 North Elston Avenue
Chicago, Ill. 60630

Dear Mr. Mayer,

I hope you did not interpret the delay in my answering your letter of September 21st as any lack of appreciation for your thoughtfulness in writing to me.

Indeed my usual tasks have been further encumbered by several of the points raised in your letter - the problems that we have in maintaining financial support for our research efforts and the political reverberations of anxieties about gene transfer research have greatly complicated efforts that should be more sharply focussed on going about our business in the laboratory.

I wish I were able to offer more immediate hopes for the very personal situation that prompts your interest in our work. As I am sure you know the problem of autism is one of the most perplexing facing us today and there is great controversy both about its underlying causes and about the best methods of treatment. Even if, as I believe likely, the underlying causes are deepseated, metabolic and developmental, this does not say that a wise program of psychologically oriented treatment may not be the best that can be offered at the present time to maximize the potentialities of children who suffer from this condition.

The evidence that autism has a genetic basis is still inconclusive and we need much sharper tools than are generally available at the present time to be able to answer this kind of question. Yes, I think it is precisely in the area that the headlines label "genetic engineering" that we are likely to be able to develop these kinds of skills. I do not think that people should be confused that this will lead to an enterprise of "genetic engineering of human beings"; but that rather the deeper knowledge that we can get about human development and disease will enable us to seek more rational remedies for dealing with the situations as they arise.

Again, I certainly do thank you for your support. If you could direct similar communications to people like Assistant Secretary for Health

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Cooper and NIH Director Donald Fredrickson, I think these are the targets likely to be the most useful at the present policy juncture. Your local congressman also undoubtedly plays a major role in deciding to just what extent budgets in this area of research will or will not be trimmed, and I hope you have let him know how you feel about it as well.

Some of the criticism that was levelled against research in this area was that it dealt with rare genetic disease and that this was a misallocation of resources. I believe this to be a basic misunderstanding of the way in which general medical progress can be achieved - and I had been spending considerable time at the World Health Organization trying to relate to those broader issues. But even if so, I can think of nothing more immoral than to disregard the tragedies and fears and hopes of particular individuals if there are possibilities of amelioration.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

Enclosure
JL/rr